

After years of waiting for funding for the project, work began last week to deepen the channels of St. Jerome Creek in Ridge, as a crew of 20 men from North Carolina have been working there day and night.

This is the fourth time that the sprawling creek, home to two marinas, has had to be dredged as currents from the Chesapeake Bay keep funneling sand and sediment into the creek. It was last dredged in 1991.

For hundreds of yards from the mouth of the creek into the bay, the depth of the water is three feet at low tide. Once a vessel enters the creek, it has to stay within the channels, and the markers are hard to distinguish from the markers around the dredging pipelines. Straying just a few feet to the right or left of the channel can ground the boat on the bottom.

Just last summer, Michael Henderson, owner of Buzz's Marina, had to pull out about 30 boats that were stuck in the southern prong of the creek.

When sudden storms approach on the bay, boaters only have St. Jerome Creek to take safe harbor in between Point Lookout and Solomons, and they don't need to get stuck in St. Jerome Creek, said Commissioner Daniel H. Raley (D), though it's unlikely a boat would sink in water that doesn't go above a person's head. But he stressed that the creek is not just a local issue for Ridge. The creek is almost four miles from its northern to southern tip, and the creek has two branches, a cove and a bay contained within. "It's a pretty big chunk of water," Raley said.

Coming up the southern prong on Friday afternoon, Henderson took a group toward the dredging vessel. The depth in the channel was around five feet, but it was high tide. At low tide, the depth can go down to two feet in that portion of the creek.

The dredging boat itself sat just inside the mouth of the creek that day, waiting for its pipelines to clear, resembling a houseboat with cranes on the front of it. The Cottrell Contracting Corp. of Chesapeake, Va. won the bid from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

In the area dredged last week, the depth of the water was 18 feet at the mouth.

David Gore, the ship's operator, said the crew eats and sleeps on the boat, while the dredging continues as long as the equipment keeps up. They work for 17 days and then get four days off. The entire crew is from North Carolina, and they had been working in the central Chesapeake Bay before coming to St. Jerome Creek.

"They work 24/7, never stop," Henderson said. "I came in here fishing the other night, the place was lit up."

A large arm on the bow of the vessel goes down to the creek bottom, cuts up the material, where it is sucked up and sent down thousands of feet of pipeline to a nearby disposal site. If everything is running optimally and nothing clogs the pipeline, they can dredge 100 feet of material in one hour.

So far, only a few tires, a sailboat runner and a few fish have been sucked up with the silt, Gore said. The total scope of work is 4,900 feet of the federally owned channel and 2,230 feet of the southern prong of the creek.

After some disagreement between the county commissioners and state officials over who would fund the work and when, Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md., 5th) announced last fall he had secured \$850,000 for the work. The commissioners had offered up to \$100,000 to get work started, but the Army Corps of Engineers can only accept federal funds. Hoyer's office also announced \$200,000 was secured to study the construction of jetties around the mouth of the creek to prevent future infill, but that money is gone. "We're currently working with Steny Hoyer to get that put back in," Raley said. Meanwhile, the spoils are being deposited into a large, 13-acre, earthen enclosure on Henderson's property near the marina. The pipeline brings in a mixture of silt and water. The silt gets separated and the water drains back.

Henderson said the spoil doesn't smell bad and is a clean, white sand. "We can make beaches out of it," he joked.

County government paid the previous owner \$125,000 for the lease of the spoil site, and then the Hendersons bought the spoil site along with the rest of the property. "The Hendersons have

been great to work with," Raley said. Once the hole gets filled in with spoil, Henderson said he plans to convert the site into a cow pasture.